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ABSTRACT

This guide for parents seeks to answer seven questions concerning the social studies: (1) What is social studies? (2) Why is social studies important at every grade level? (3) What kinds of materials are used to teach social studies? (4) What teaching strategies are used in social studies classes? (5) What have the national reports on education said about social studies? (6) What issues are discussed in social studies classes? and (7) How can parents help their children in the social studies? (DB)

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A PARENT'S GUIDE TO THE SOCIAL STUDIES

First edition by Daniel Roselle
Revised by Laurel R. Singleton

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1. What Is Social Studies?

Social studies is a basic subject of the K-12 curriculum. It includes instructional courses, programs, and projects designed to help your child understand, analyze, react to, and act upon:

- The relationships of human beings to the world in which they live.
- The relationships of human beings to other human beings.
- The relationships of human beings to themselves.

Just as language arts includes the areas of reading, spelling, composition, speaking, grammar, and literature, social studies encompasses many areas of knowledge and many kinds of skills. Social studies focuses on the following areas of knowledge:

- History—the study of past events in the United States and the world. Prior to the 20th Century, social studies did not exist: history was the key subject. Today, although the social studies is broader than merely history, that subject is a cornerstone of every social studies program.
- Geography—the study of the earth (its landforms, resources, and climate) and how life is distributed on it. Along with history, geography provides a foundation on which other concepts and ideas can be built.
- Government—study of the theories, systems, structures, and processes of state, local, and national government. Learning about the Constitution is an integral part of the study of government.
- Economics—the study of how goods and services are produced, bought, and sold.
- Anthropology, Sociology, and Psychology—study of cultures, groups, and individuals.
- The Humanities—literature, art, music, dance, and drama. These artforms are examined to give students a better understanding of cultures.

In addition, the content of science is looked at to help students understand the effects of natural and physical science and technology on human relationships.

Equally important is providing students with information about the values and beliefs that underlie our society. The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution embody many of our nation's most enduring values. Yet other values change as our society changes. Beliefs of Americans have changed in many areas: child labor, civil rights, the role of women, education, and our relationship with other nations to name a few.

We live in a time of rapid change. In such times, it is important for students to understand the basic values of our society and to have an opportunity to analyze the influence of values in determining people's actions, past and present.

Social studies programs also develop important skills. These

include special reading skills (reading maps, charts, and graphs), study skills, research skills, thinking skills, decision-making skills, interpersonal skills, group skills, and political and social participation skills.

As you can see, social studies goals are ambitious. During any one year of school, however, your child will focus on only a part of the entire realm of content and skills targeted by social studies. The emphasis for each grade level is integrated into an overall plan or framework that your school district has developed. Within that plan, each year of the social studies program builds on the knowledge and skills gained in previous years and adds new information and abilities.

Understanding your school district's overall social studies plan will enable you to understand how the instruction your child receives each year will help him or her achieve the set of goals the district has established. If you do not receive information about the plan, ask your child's teacher or principal to get you a copy or discuss it with you.

2. Why Is Social Studies Important at Every Grade Level?

One of the purposes of social studies has always been the preparation of citizens. Citizen participation in public life is essential to the health of our democratic system. The role of citizen is more complex today than ever before. In a single week, the United States can be affected by decisions on oil prices in the Middle East, terrorism in Western Europe, a nuclear accident in the Soviet Union, and an economic summit in Japan. At the local level, citizens face complex problems concerning pollution, use of resources, provision of high-quality, equitable schooling, and medical ethics.

Effective social studies programs help prepare young people who can identify, understand, and work to solve the problems that face our increasingly diverse nation and interdependent world. Content from history provides understanding of the beliefs and experiences on which our way of life and that of others are based. Geographic knowledge provides the data students need to understand problems of population, pollution, and resource depletion. Study of government identifies how students can enter the system to make an impact. Skills developed in social studies are also critical, empowering young citizens to gather more information, consider that information critically, and make informed decisions.

Social studies also enables students to deal more readily with the roles they fill, both as young people and adults—those of family member, friend, group member, worker, and consumer. Some basic understanding of our economic system is valuable to the worker/consumer. Even primary students make economic

decisions! Knowledge of how people function as members of groups and skills in interpersonal interactions can be applied to the roles of family member, friend, and group member.

Finally, when presented in an engaging way, there is much in social studies that is fascinating—for what is more interesting than people and their relationship to the world around them? Thus, a well-planned social studies program can help your child develop a true love of learning, a gift that will expand your child's horizons throughout his or her lifetime.

Since students must learn many new skills in the first few years of school, some parents might ask why social studies must be taught at every grade level. As parents, you know that children begin developing their personalities at a very young age. Indeed, many important values and beliefs are learned long before students enter kindergarten. Because even the youngest children are building the foundation of their civic and social identities, the social studies curriculum must be strong even in the earliest grades. Furthermore, the sophisticated skills and knowledge students learn at the upper grades depend on a solid base gained earlier.

If your goals for your child include becoming an informed, thinking citizen who also succeeds as a family member, friend, worker, consumer, and group member, demand that your school offer a solid social studies program at every grade level.

3. What Kind of Materials Are Used to Teach Social Studies?

Textbooks are still important elements of most social studies classes. But chances are that the textbooks look significantly different than the texts you used in school. Today's texts are more colorful, use more visuals (such as maps, charts, cartoons, photographs, and graphs) to enhance learning, present information about minorities and women more equitably (though still not perfectly), and contain more source material—original documents for students to analyze.

A glance through one of today's textbooks indicates that your children *do* learn as many facts as earlier generations did—probably more. But these facts are used not merely for the purpose of memorization. Why?

Facts change. Remember when you memorized that President Abraham Lincoln wrote every word of the Gettysburg Address on the back of an old envelope while he was riding on a train to Gettysburg? Scholars now tell us that this "fact" is inaccurate. In today's world, the expansion of new knowledge is incredible. And access to knowledge through computerized data bases and other devices is also growing. Thus, the knowledge students have when they leave school may be outdated ten years later.

People often contradict themselves. The Frenchman

Rousseau once said in one of his books: ". . . you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody." But just as you set down as a "fact" that Rousseau was against private property, you read his comment in another of his writings: "It is certain that the right of property is the most sacred of all the rights of citizens and more important in some respects than liberty itself." Which "fact" shall a teacher tell your child?

People differ in their points of view. Two individuals can look at the same event and describe the "facts" of what happened differently. That is one reason why one book may be entitled *The Civil War* and another on the same topic *The War Between the States*.

Faced with an expanding body of knowledge and diverse views of the same topics, many social studies teachers choose to emphasize development of students' ability to think critically. They are trying to help your child ask productive questions, search for information, analyze findings, and draw conclusions about the questions raised. Because these teachers know that the "facts" may change, they see the need to develop skills that will allow students to gain, think about, and use new information as it becomes available

To achieve these goals, teachers supplement their textbooks with a range of materials—films, filmstrips, tapes, records, skill workbooks, hands-on materials, maps, globes, games, primary sources, newspapers, news magazines, and others. Your child may even be asked to watch a television program to gather information about a current or historical issue.

Thus, while most social studies teachers do use textbooks to organize the information presented to the class, they draw upon a variety of other materials as well to help students use and expand on the facts gained from their texts.

4. What Teaching Strategies Are Used in Social Studies Classes?

If you visited five different social studies classrooms during a school day, you might well observe five different kinds of activities. Skilled social studies teachers provide their classes with varied learning opportunities. These may include watching films and filmstrips, listening to tapes and records, participating in role-playing and simulations, surveying the community on key problems, undertaking independent research projects, handling artifacts, analyzing source materials, working directly with community resources, photographing scenes of social significance, playing a computerized market game, traveling outside the school environment, and experimenting with a variety of learning experiences—all of which can help students learn how to learn on their own. In addition, effort is being made to

assist children who learn in different ways and at different paces.

Most social studies teachers divide class time between whole-class instruction, small-group work, and individual work. Some advantages of varying grouping in this way are:

- Whole-group activities such as lecture, demonstration, and text reading help the teacher make sure that all the students get the same basic information. Class discussions, guided by careful teacher questioning, can help students critically think through issues presented in a lecture or text passage.
- Small-group activities help students develop important social skills, such as the ability to reach group decisions. Some research indicates that the practice of having students work on teams on which each member of the team must participate actively in order for the group to achieve its goal builds positive attitudes among students and supports learning.
- Through individual activities, students who need additional work in certain areas can be provided that practice while students who have mastered the basic work can be challenged with enriching activities. In addition, individual activities build students' study skills and self-discipline.

Two premises underlie all the instructional practices used by the good social studies teacher: (1) learning activities should engage the student directly and actively in the learning process and (2) instructional activities should help students organize their experiences—both in and out of the classroom—to promote learning. Parents can assist in this process by keeping abreast of what students are learning in social studies and relating that to experiences your child has had.

5. What Have the National Reports on Education Said About Social Studies?

Since 1982, more than 30 national reports on U.S. education have been published. None of the reports focuses specifically on social studies, but most do discuss it. An analysis of six major reports* found the following regarding social studies:

- All six reports supported a significant place for social studies in the curriculum. About 15 percent of elementary class time and three years of high school study were recommended levels of social studies instruction; these figures are close to the actual amounts of time now being devoted to social studies.

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*The six reports analyzed by Fred M. Newmann in *Educational Reform and Social Studies: Implications of Six Reports* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, 1985) were: Adler (1982), *The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto*; Boyer (1983), *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*; The College Board (1983), *Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do*; Goodlad (1983), *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future*; National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*; and Sizer (1984), *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*.

- All six stressed the importance of developing good citizens as a purpose of schooling. While all subject areas contribute to this development, social studies is generally recognized as the key subject area.
- Of all the content and skills taught in social studies, the reports emphasized history and thinking skills most strongly.

In addition, the reports made several other recommendations that could affect social studies:

- Content should be decided upon locally, but decisions should be based on the idea that a common core curriculum would be taught to all students in a school or district.
- Teachers should give students more individual feedback on their work and should use questions that help students reach deeper understanding.
- Teachers should be relieved of housekeeping chores to allow them more time to prepare for teaching and for professional development.
- How well students are doing should be evaluated more frequently and in different ways than is currently being done. The reports differ, however, on how those assessments should be done. Some favor greater use of standardized tests and others suggest less traditional assessment measures, such as public exhibits of student work.

Finally, the reports agree that changes in one area are difficult to make unless issues such as the conditions under which teachers work are addressed. As parents, you can support not only constructive changes in the social studies program, but also improvements in the overall school climate that will make it a better place to teach and learn.

6. What Issues Are Discussed in Social Studies Classes?

The issues discussed in social studies classes are varied. In a U.S. history class, students may examine issues ranging from the role of religion in the life of Colonial America to states' rights to the Japanese internment during World War II. Students in government classes look at a broad spectrum of public policy issues—foreign affairs, education, the role of the judicial system today, civil rights. Such public policy issues as resource conservation and land use may be discussed in geography courses.

The effectiveness of a social studies class often depends on the freedom of the teacher and the students to inquire openly, to read from a wide range of books, to discuss issues honestly, and to express views without fear of being penalized for holding unpopular opinions. This freedom can be a major factor in achieving one of the goals of social studies: the development of effective citizens in a democratic society. After all, free discussion of issues is the heart of the democratic process.

Sometimes, however, these issues may be controversial.

Discussing controversial issues can actually motivate students to take part in class activities. Why? Because students see such issues as being relevant to their lives, both now and in the future.

Yet parents, school administrators, teachers, and students disagree on how far the freedom to discuss controversial issues should go. Some parents feel strongly that they are primarily responsible for teaching their children about all topics that reflect a moral element. Some groups object to teaching children about historical events or current problems that reflect badly on the U.S. government. Others have been opposed to the use of particular books or magazines because of the ideas discussed or the language used.

On the other hand, other parents, school administrators, teachers, and students feel strongly that few, if any, limitations should be placed on teachers' and students' rights to read about and discuss any issue, however controversial it may be. They are convinced that an unrestricted and open analysis of problems will result in the development of students with sound views and in a better society.

The rights of teachers and students to examine controversial topics have been upheld in numerous court cases. The courts have indicated that this freedom has limits, however; three factors are critical:

- A teacher should not act so as to disrupt the school or incite students to do so.
- A teacher should not go beyond clearly stated district limits to instructional discretion or violate explicit rules.
- A teacher should not use profanity.

In hearing academic freedom cases, courts also take into account specific surrounding circumstances and attempt to gauge the seriousness of the teachers' actions. Courts will also generally consider the maturity of the students, the opinion of other professionals in the field, and the relevance of the controversial item to the course.

The standards courts use can also be applied by parents. If you are concerned about an issue being discussed in your child's social studies class, ask yourself:

- Is the issue being discussed relevant to the course?
- Is the issue appropriate for the maturity and experiential level of your child?
- Is the issue being presented openly, without the teacher's forcing an opinion on students?
- Is your child interested in the issue and motivated to learn about it?

If the answer to these questions is "no," call your child's teacher and ask why he or she has introduced this particular issue. Most teachers will welcome the opportunity to explain why they think an issue is important to the class and to hear parents' views on the subject.

Most parents, regardless of their position on controversial

issues, are deeply concerned about their children's education. All parents therefore have a dual right: (1) a right to be assured that their children are not being indoctrinated or forced to accept the opinions of their teachers on political, economic, and social issues and, at the same time, (2) a right to be assured that the freedom of their children and their children's teachers to inquire, to read, and to think for themselves is not being unfairly interfered with.

The role of social studies teachers is crucial here, and it is essential that parents understand and support their teaching efforts, provided that the teachers accept both their rights and responsibilities. (The National Council for the Social Studies, the national professional association of teachers of social studies, set down its position concerning teacher rights and responsibilities in a policy statement. You can obtain a copy of it for a nominal sum by writing to NCSS, 3501 Newark Street NW, Washington, DC 20016.)

7. How Can Parents Help Their Children in the Social Studies?

The ultimate responsibility for learning about social studies rests with your child. However, you as a parent can do much to assist your child in this task. Here are a few of the possibilities:

1. Encourage your child to express his or her ideas on political, economic, and social matters freely at home—even if they differ from your own—and discuss these ideas with him or her on a basis of mutual respect for each other as individuals.
2. Subscribe to at least two magazines or newspapers that take widely different positions on issues, so that your child can learn to become familiar with a variety of viewpoints. Or, to keep expenses down, use the magazines and newspapers available in the public library. Watch television news with your child.
3. If you feel that freedom to learn is being interfered with, that books are being unfairly censored, or that teachers', students', and the community's rights are being curtailed in your child's school, let the principal, the Board of Education, and others know where you stand.
4. Take an active part in PTA meetings, particularly when issues arise concerning the curriculum. Be as much (or more) concerned about the type of education your child is receiving today in the social studies as about whether or not "the courses are required to get him or her into college."
5. Work to see that all new social studies teachers employed to teach in your school are well qualified in the area of social studies. Unless the condition of your school system's finances is so critical as to make it inadvisable to do so, urge

that social studies teachers be assigned to a full teaching load rather than a double assignment involving non-social studies preparations.

6. Don't let significant holidays pass by unnoticed. There must be more to July 4th than firecrackers and more to Thanksgiving than turkey. Take time to discuss with your child the meaning of such holidays and their relationships to our lives today.
7. Go with your child to political, economic, and social events from which he or she can learn; for example, a session of a local political group, a taxpayers' meeting called to discuss a school district budget, a public hearing concerning the construction of a playground near your home, a debate about the need for low-cost housing in the inner city.
8. Have available for reference at home a well-written and accurate encyclopedia, two dictionaries (one of which should be at the level of your child's understanding), a volume on synonyms and antonyms, an atlas, and an up-to-date almanac. Encyclopedias can be costly, of course, and may not fit your budget; however, the other items are available in inexpensive paperbacks. (All can be found at the library, of course.) Since recordings often capture the moods and attitudes of individuals and groups in a society, keep a record player and records that reflect your child's tastes as well as your own.
9. Keep your eye on television programs (both figuratively and literally). Many of these programs deal effectively with such social studies subjects as historical events, life in the cities, rising population, cost of living, environmental pollution, social security for the aged, and international tensions. View such programs together with your child so that you share a common base of information and concern about issues.
10. Demonstrate to your child that you really do believe in the importance of good citizenship by taking actions with him or her against any attempts in your neighborhood to discriminate against people because of race, religion, sex, ethnic origin, or opinion.
11. Finally, let your children know that, despite wars, famine, corruption, and other conditions that plague our world, you have not lost faith in the ability of human beings to solve their problems. It is difficult for children to have faith in principles that their parents no longer accept. So if you believe that by intelligence, compassion, and hard work, human beings can create a decent world, let your children know it. *Your confidence may help your children to do it!*